

# US govt 'fake varsity covert op' traps 8 from T & AP running student visa scam

## 600 'Students' From India Face Jail, Deportation

Chidanand.Rajghatta  
@timesgroup.com

Washington: The polar vortex may have brought untold cold to the American Midwest, but hundreds of purported Indian students across the country are getting the shivers after being entrapped by the US Immig-

### FULL COVERAGE: P 2

rations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in an immigration racket.

In an extraordinary saga that has put some 600 Indian

## FAKE INDIAN STUDENTS FALL FOR US GOVT TRAP

► Arrest warrants against 600 'students'; 100 already under detention

► The fake varsity, 'University of Farmington', was set up by US Homeland Security

► Created by US govt to ensnare anyone trying to enter US via fake academic route

► The US operation was conducted between Feb 2017 and Jan 2019

► 'Recruiters' helped 'students' remain illegally in US under 'pay-to-stay' fraud



youngsters on thin legal ice and resulted in the arrest of eight alleged masterminds (all from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh), the US Department of Homeland Security set up a fake university in Michigan to target foreigners

who wanted to immigrate to the US using a phony academic route. Hundreds of Indians fell into the trap.

The names of those charged in the indictments were given as: Barath Kakireddy, 29, of Lake Mary, Florida; Su-

resh Reddy Kandala, 31, of Culpeper, Virginia; Phanidep Karnati, 35, of Louisville, Kentucky; Prem Kumar Rampeesa, 26, of Charlotte, North Carolina; Santosh Reddy Sama, 28, of Fremont, California; Avinash Thakkappally, 28, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Aswanth Nune, 26, of Atlanta; and Naveen Prathipati, 26, of Dallas.

In an indictment filed in January and unsealed this week, US prosecutors alleged that from February 2017 through January 2019, the eight defendants "conspired with each other and others to fraudulently facilitate hundreds of foreign nationals in illegally remaining and working in the United States by actively recruiting them to enroll into a metro Detroit private

university that, unbeknownst to the conspirators, was operated by HSI (Homeland Security Investigation) special agents as part of an undercover operation."

The so-called University of Farmington set up by the homeland security department harvested nearly 600 "students," mostly from India, whom the defendants helped illegally remain and work in the United States as part of a 'pay to stay' scheme, the indictment said, alleging that the youngsters "knew that they would not attend any actual classes, earn credits or make academic progress toward an actual degree," and were willing participants in an immigration fraud.

► US bid to catch frauds: P 2

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# Farmington was 'real' in the virtual space

Sushil.Rao@timesgroup.com

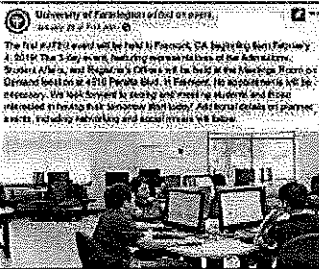
Hyderabad: The fake university created by the US Department of Homeland Security to apprehend those indulging in visa fraud cases had everything in its website to attract genuine students. The website had attractive features of the university explained and even a Facebook page.

While the university existed in the 'virtual space', in reality at 30500 Northwestern Highway where the University of Farmington is physically located, there is hardly anything that could give even a faint idea that it was meant to be a university.

The website of the university has no photographs to show its premises but has photographs to show students at their books. On Thursday, the Facebook page and Twitter Account of the university were no longer available after the US authorities themselves de-

## ATTRACTIVE ONLY ON A SCREEN

The University of Farmington has an operational website to attract students. The 'Factoids' section of their website even mentions their student composition along with the university fees and even an accreditation. The 'university' would also post updates on social media about its activities and seminars.



clared that it was a fake university created by the US Department of Homeland Security itself for a purpose.

In the "Our Beginnings" section of its website, it in-

forms that the University of Farmington traces its lineage back to the early 1950s, when returning soldiers from the Second World War were seeking a quality and marketable

education. There is also an interesting 'Factoids' section on its website which only goes to show that practically no classes taken place in the university. The factoids included: Students who discuss classwork with a professor outside class: 100%, Students working full-time in area of study: 98% and that students hail from 50 states and 47 countries.

One of the last posts on the FB page was on January 28 which announced an event to be held on February 4, 2019. It was announced that the three-day event featuring representatives of the admissions, students affairs, and registrar's offices will be held at the meetings room on 'demand location at 4510 Peralta Blvd, in Fremont'. "No appointments will be necessary. We look forward to seeing and meeting students and those interested in having their tomorrow start today!" the post said in a bid to attract students.



# Students from Telugu states in a fix following US arrests

Nirupa.Vatyam@timesgroup.com

**Hyderabad:** The arrest of eight students on charges of conspiracy to commit visa fraud and hundreds facing the threat of deportation for joining in a fake university has left Telugu students studying in the United States restless.

Students said that if one fails to get an H1-B visa, they opt for a second masters, so that they get Curricular Practical Training (CPT), which is temporary employment authorised under the F-1 visa for non-immigrant foreign students.

"Many of my friends opted to do a second masters when they failed to get a job after completing their Optional Practical Training (OPT) period. While few of them used CPT to work and parallelly managed to complete the course, others discontinued after their H1-B visa was processed. I don't think this comes under violation of visa status," said a graduate of a California-based university. Students said there are colleges which offer CPT from Day-1 of a course but makes sure everything is legal.

"Generally, a student of graduation level gets CPT for



less than a year. But there are colleges which provide CPT for about two years for the same level of degree. I am sure there must be some loopholes in the law. Students who joined such colleges are confident that their visa status is valid. The sudden arrests and possible deportations is creating confusion and restlessness among students," said a graduate, who recently completed his graduation from a university based out of Mexico.

Students, who joined the fake Farmington university, also said that they have no clue that their varsity is illegal. In a voice recording, which was done by the roommates of a student when federal agents paid a surprise visit, the student was he-

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GRADUATE FROM A UNIVERSITY  
BASED OUT OF MEXICO

ard saying that his visa status is valid. "My OPT expired recently and my H1B application is under process. I have joined a second masters course and attend classes online. I even paid my semester fee recently," said a student of Farmington university under the condition of anonymity.

Interestingly, while Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the department through which student and exchange visitor information system (SEVIS) is generated to facilitate entry of a student into the US, authorises more than 12 months of CPT, the United States Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) considers it a violation of the F-1 visa status.



# Number of students from state opting for studies in US sees dip amid clampdown

Nirupa.Vatyam@timesgroup.com

Hyderabad: Deportation of Indian students at regular intervals, restrictive immigration laws and a low probability of securing an H-1B visa after their studies have adversely affected the number of students from Telangana applying for universities in the United States.

According to representatives of Hyderabad-based consultancies and various universities in the United States of America, the number has gone down by at least 50 percent in recent times.

"From my past two years, there has been a steady decrease in the number of enquiries we are getting for universities in the United States. In fact, between August and September 2018, we did not receive even a single enquiry about US universities. During the same period, we received 150-200 enquiries for Canadian and Australian universities, of which 150 of them have already started their process," said a representative from the Eminence Immigration Consultant in Madhapur.

## FAKE UNIVERSITY NOT A FIRST BY US HOMELAND SECURITY

This is not the first time authorities at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) put up a fake university as part of its immigration sting to identify recruiters engaged in immigration fraud

### PAST INSTANCES: UNNJ (2016) AND TRI-VALLEY UNIVERSITY (2011)

► The University of Northern New Jersey (UNNJ) was set up in 2016 to catch those indulging in student visa fraud. The sting operation took place after several student fraud cases were reported, involving an unaccredited university Tri-Valley University (TVU) in Northern California

► In 2011, 435 Indian students of TVU were transferred to other schools after US authorities found out that it was a fake university. Almost 85 percent TVU students were Indians, and mostly from AP



► During the UNNJ sting, the DHS had indicted 21 brokers, recruiters and employers from the USA, who allegedly conspired with more than 1,000 foreign nationals

### SILICON VALLEY UNIVERSITY (2015-16)

► As many as 550 students from Hyderabad were deported from the US, in 2015-16, following controversy over the credibility of two US universities - Silicon Valley University, San Jose and Northwestern Polytechnic University, Fremont

► The US Customs and Border Protection agency asked airline operators to disallow students enrolled with SVU or NPU from boarding flights

► Move led to massive outcry among US-bound students who alleged that they were being treated like "criminals"; many claimed they were "locked up" at Abu Dhabi for hours before being unceremoniously deported

► Universities vehemently denied charges of being "blacklisted" by the US Government; NPU officials claimed it was only students with "fraudulent bank and financial documentation" who were sent back

The consultancies attributed the reduction in the number of enquiries to various factors including the deportation of Indian students in the recent past. "Deportation is obviously one of the reasons why students are scared to go to the USA. Other factors like better chances of getting permanent resident (PR) status

and an increase in the number of job opportunities in Canada and Australia are also playing a role in students not opting US-based universities. The number has decreased at least by 60 percent," said Salteja from a consultancy based in Cyberabad.

Representatives of universities said that they are concerned about the dip and are doing their best to counsel prospective students. "Earlier, as a university, we were busy promoting our brand. Now, it has become inevitable to start promoting your country first as students are wary about coming to the United States for higher education. They are scared to come to the country

under the Trump regime as they fear deportation," said a representative from a university in Virginia. "Earlier, when I used to ask a room full of people how many of them want to study in the USA, almost 90 percent of hands used to go up. However, now I could hardly see 5 percent of people showing interest," he added.